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## Papers

# Women-only management training: An essential part of women's leadership development

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**ABSTRACT** *A change is needed in the way companies approach leadership development, which currently results in the reproduction of male leaders similar to those of the previous generation. At present, many women do not develop to their full potential — a serious waste in the war for talent. Managing diversity and developing tomorrow's diverse leaders are key tasks for leadership in UK organisations. This paper considers the important role of women-only training in the development of the females in the next generation of leaders, and in the enhancement of their careers. The authors believe that in addition to, and not as a substitute for, other leadership courses and support mechanisms such as mentoring and coaching, women-only training enables women to clarify their leadership ambitions, recognise their leadership strengths and access leadership positions. Organisations that support such learning experiences will benefit from a wider and stronger pool of talent than before.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

It is very interesting that, while there is national recognition that girls perform better in single-sex schools, single-sex

teaching at postgraduate and post-experience levels is still hotly contested. There is a strong view endorsed by the UK government that

the next generation of business leaders should not be cloned from the same mould, as has been the case in the past (DTI, 2002). Such cloning can lead to poor corporate governance, as many board directors are reported to agree decisions without full discussion of the factors involved. Corporate board directors are still predominantly males with similar backgrounds, education and ways of thinking. For example, 97 per cent of FTSE 100 executive directorships are held by males (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2002). The old boys' network still excludes those who are different simply on the basis of their categorisation as 'other' than the norm. Many employers, however, are now seeking to widen the pool from which the next generation of business leaders will be selected. The UK's top graduates now see the world, not just their country, as their workplace, and meritocratic career paths need to be visible right to the top or much of that talent may go elsewhere. Many organisations are moving towards diversity management to value and take advantage of the different perspectives and talents that come from a more diverse pool of employees. Women make up the largest group of diversity in the workforce, yet they are only scarcely represented in business leadership.

The move towards diversity and a competency approach to management mean that women managers should have more opportunities to be talent-spotted for management development by their organisations. Such development for male managers usually takes the form of continuing professional development and includes formal programmes such as MBA programmes. As men were almost the only managers around when the MBA programmes were designed, however, and as the majority of business school academics were (and still are)

men, inevitably management education reflected — and still reflects — male needs and male ways of learning.

This paper reviews some pertinent literature on women and management training. A psychoanalytical lens is used to explore women's and men's different development and different ways of knowing, which lead to their different development needs in preparation for leadership in organisations. Traditional MBA training is also compared with women-only management training. Some suggestions are made for the design of women-only training, and its implications for developing tomorrow's female leaders. It is concluded that changes are needed in the way companies think about management and leadership development, so that women can play a fuller and more equal part in the senior management and corporate boardrooms of tomorrow.

## **WOMEN AND MANAGEMENT TRAINING**

### **The 30 per cent barrier of women on MBA programmes**

First, it is considered why so few women buy into MBA education. Despite marketing and bursaries targeted at women students, women in the UK have not shown as strong an interest in undertaking MBAs as their male peers. This is not just a UK issue, as is evidenced by the 20–30 per cent plateau of female participation seen internationally on MBA programmes. Many schools report even lower female participation rates in full-time programmes. For example, at the UK's Cranfield School of Management, the percentage of women on the full-time MBA was 19 per cent in 2002/03, compared with 30 per cent on the part-time MBA.

### Explanations for the lack of women MBAs

It may be that women do not see the value of the MBA qualification as clearly as do the men. In the UK, a study by Simpson (1996) showed that women ex-MBA students did not feel that the new qualification helped them very much in their business careers.

Women's lesser participation in MBA education, particularly full-time programmes, may be due to a lack (or perceived lack) of available finances. Perhaps women find it more difficult to obtain the large loans needed for fees, especially at the better business schools — but then the low take-up of bursary places would not support that argument. Perhaps women do not want to take the risk, given the few women role models at the top of UK industry. Women may feel that the opportunity cost is too high. Perhaps they do not see a likely return on investment as they do not expect to achieve as high salaries as their male peers — this argument is supported by the UK gender full-time pay gap of almost 30 per cent in the private sector in 2002 (Women & Equality Unit, 2002). Another possibility is that women tend not to plan their careers as carefully as men, especially in the early years, and so they do not have their eye on building up a career portfolio and curriculum vitae in preparation for advancement to positions several years later. Finally, it is clear that not all women managers want to progress hierarchically in their careers (Sturges, 1999), and hence women managers may not wish to invest in MBA education to the same degree as their male counterparts.

### A US survey of women and MBA programmes

In the USA, Catalyst (2000), a not-for-profit organisation which

promotes the integration of women into leadership, undertook a survey of 1,684 MBA students from 12 universities. Half the students were female. When asked what would make a difference, almost 90 per cent of the women said they believed that more female role models at leadership levels would encourage more women to take up MBA education. Many of the MBA women reported that business schools and traditional careers were not in line with their own personal and professional goals. The biggest problems for the US women were the lack of focus on learning, the overly competitive culture and the lack of diversity in class. In particular, there was little acknowledgment that women MBA students were often struggling with family responsibilities as well as their MBA education.

### Deeper explanations

There may, however, be a different set of reasons why women do not buy into MBA education to the same extent as men (Sinclair, 1995, 1997). It may be more to do with the design and delivery of the education, rather than access to it. Women may see the structure of the full-time MBA programmes as being insensitive to their needs and circumstances, which so often are different from those of their male peers. Women may be turned off by the different ethical approach of the business orientation (MacLelland and Dobson, 1997), focused on wealth maximisation, game theory conceptualisation and the rationality presumed to underpin management, while failing to deal with the moral implications of self-interest.

The Australian study undertaken in the early 1990s by Sinclair reported almost a total lack of male awareness of how different the experiences of women and minority students were in

comparison to those of the dominant male majority group. Despite the rhetoric of gender-neutral teaching, Sinclair described the MBA education as a 'masculinised set of practices' which reinforced male dominance. Males were in the majority as faculty members, students and the leading role-players in all the case studies. This led to institutionalisation and privileging of gender differences. There were language and communication differences, and women were spread thinly across learning teams. This meant that they had little chance to work with other female colleagues, leaving them to struggle to get the female voice heard in team discussions. In addition, their male team peers expected women to undertake the subordinate role, and to do the more menial and also social tasks for the group.

There was a centralisation of power and authority by males, both as teachers and students. Definitions of good teaching were associated with charisma, expert power and authority, as well as maleness. Women felt that they were stereotyped as stupid, ignorant and lacking in prior knowledge if they asked questions in class. This led them to lose confidence — until their examination results showed that they had on average better results than the males.

Women MBA students reported a wide gap between their own experience and what they had to learn in the MBA course. They also saw a tension between analytical replication versus emotional and imaginative learning, the former being privileged by the males. Women reported that connection was the catalyst for their learning. They enjoyed the collaborative learning experiences, where they could trust their colleagues and let go of any need for power. They looked inwards for learning, while their male peers looked outwards — an issue that will be explored in more depth later in

this paper. But it was clear that women experienced the MBA programme as something to survive and, although this was preparation for what they would also face in subsequent organisational cultures where women were in the extreme minority, their sense of value from the MBA left the women feeling marginalised and unconnected, which hindered their learning, the key point of the education.

### **Women and other executive development**

Women may choose not to do an MBA and instead may attend the usual management development courses with their male peers, but they are usually still in a minority position, particularly if the courses are designed for entry into leadership positions. Women managers seeking further development have to push hard for such development, given that their mostly male bosses often take a stereotyped view of women's career ambition and commitment to leadership. Women managers also find it more difficult to find mentors, and their approaches to potential male mentors are often seen as indicators of personal rather than professional interest (Ragins and Cotton, 1991).

Some women's courses designed for women moving into senior and leadership positions adopt the women-only design of delivery. These offer an opportunity for women to build effectiveness in their present positions, to gain a clearer understanding of their own skills, styles and personal goals, and to prepare to take on a more senior role with confidence and enthusiasm. Women leaders' courses can give senior women insights into their interactions with the dynamics of top management teams, and new strategies for succeeding at the highest levels without compromising

their own beliefs and leadership styles, in other words, maintaining their authenticity. There is an issue, however, for women seeking such courses, which is that they do not wish to be seen to need 'fixing' with women-only training. Until there is a wider understanding of what women-only training is about, and how it *complements* the male models of management and leadership development, many women will not take advantage of this different and complementary support. This paper seeks to provide an argument to justify women-only programmes as a value-added extra to conventional management training and other support mechanisms such as mentoring and coaching for leadership.

## THE IMPACT OF GENDERED DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

### Gendered experiences of work

Women have different experiences as females in the workplace from those of their male peers. They form almost half the workforce, but occupy only a third of managerial positions, and those are clustered at the lower levels. Women are also paid less than men right from initial graduation, where the gap is 15 per cent, to management levels, where the gap increases to 20 per cent (Women & Equality Unit, 2002). Women tend to gravitate towards lower-paid sectors and, even in high-flying careers, they tend to move out of functional jobs towards staff functions such as personnel and training, constrained by glass walls as well as the glass ceiling. Women are excluded from the senior informal networks by their gender. In addition, many women have a double workshift, taking care of most of the childcare and domestic responsibilities when in dual career relationships or as single mothers.

No wonder women's conceptions of

career success are often focused around surviving against all the odds in the world of work. Women value being seen as experts in their field, having an intrinsically interesting job, personal accomplishment, self-development and balancing work and personal life (Sturges, 1999). In contrast, men see career success in terms of climbing ladders and gaining influence, with the external trappings of success including high salary, car and status. Given these different values, women are likely to approach their management education with different attitudes towards what is important for them in their path to leadership positions.

### Childhood development

Psychologists who write about gender are not surprised by these differences in career success. Women and men arrive in organisations with a differently constructed sense of self as a result of their gendered upbringing, and find gendered identity patterns reinforced by organisational practices.

Chodorow (1978) suggests that it is the social system of mothering that creates different patterns of behaviour between boys and girls. She shows how women produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. In contrast, as boys develop a sense of identity, it is separate from and other than the mother. Hence girls are more likely to be anxious in situations where independence is called for. The sex-different personality development, and the structure of the family and family practices creates certain differential relational needs and capacities in men and women that reflect themselves in the roles enacted in adulthood, including the managerial role (although obviously not everyone follows those typical gender roles).

Gilligan (1982) extended the psychoanalytic work of Chodorow, exploring concepts of self and morality, and experiences of conflict and choice. Building on their early psychological development, girls 'enact' their desire for connectedness, creating close relationships. This behaviour has an impact on occupational choice, later concentrating women in caring — and lower-paid — roles and sectors in the workforce.

### Gendered ways of knowing and learning

It would seem that women and men develop different ways of knowing and learning, which have implications for later career choices, development and management education. According to Belenky *et al.* (1986), males tend to have linear careers. Initially, there is a stage of *dualism*, where young males see everything as right or wrong. They move to a stage of *multiplicity*, where they recognise that others may have knowledge, and that their own knowledge and moral judgment is just as valid. They then start to use *analytical* tools such as rules and logic for evaluation, eventually recognising that *knowledge is constructed*, and that morality has relative contexts. The teacher in this model is like a banker of knowledge, giving facts and analytical tools, which help the student to learn and apply to other situations.

In contrast, women tend not to have linear careers, but pass through several stages and can be in any stage at any time. Initially, in the *stage of silence*, young females accept knowledge and their sense of morality from men, especially their father. Gradually, they recognise that they are learning from that external authority, and are in a state of *received knowledge*. Moving to

*subjective knowledge*, they start to use themselves as an inner authority and guide to learning about themselves. In the *procedural knowledge* stage, the woman starts to evaluate how she is learning, either by separate knowing (applying rules and processes) or connected knowing, where she is able to put herself into the other person's experience in her own mind. The fifth stage is *integrated knowing*, through the intellect and emotion, integrating the context, tolerating ambiguity and strengthening the self. Many women do not ever reach the fifth stage, and many will move backwards and forwards between the different stages at various times in their lives. The teacher in the female model of knowing is like a midwife, helping the woman to reflect on her knowing, and enabling her to bring forth understanding from her own experiences, through which her own analytical tools can be developed and applied to other situations. These gender differences in the development of learning lead to a consideration of how best to design management training appropriate to women, alongside their core MBA courses.

### WOMEN MANAGERS' PARTICULAR DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS

#### A review of women-only training

MBA programmes are traditionally designed around the male model of learning. This may be a key reason why so few women enrol on MBA programmes, and why so many women who did take the MBA course found the experience one to survive, rather than to value highly as a learning experience for leadership.

One response to the different developmental paths of men and

women is to consider women-only development, either as an additional resource on the MBA programme, for instance as an elective course, or as totally separate management development courses. In the 1970s, women-only management training focused on identifying and remedying perceived deficiencies in women such as a lack of ambition and assertiveness (Gray, 1994). In the 1980s, these programmes started to respect and build upon the very differences between female and male managers which have been nurtured from early childhood. Essentially, these programmes provided women with the opportunity of reflecting and reinterpreting their managerial experiences exclusively with other women. When women managers are in the minority, they often disregard their differences, values and preferences, in order to make themselves like their male peers. Tanton (1992) calls this an abrogation of their female self. On women-only management programmes, women can contribute openly, their femininity can be freely expressed, and they can demonstrate authenticity to their values.

### **The argument against women-only programmes**

A radical feminist argument against women-only programmes is that they assume a women's deficiencies model, thereby contributing to the continued subordination of women who do not fit the organisational mould. Post-structuralist feminists would criticise women-only programmes because they celebrate women's differences without giving sufficient attention to the underlying power structures and processes which hold them back. They may not see it as important to deconstruct the texts on which male

authority has been legitimised (Calás and Smircich, 1995).

### **Some key elements of women-only training**

The aim of women-only training for management and leadership positions primarily addresses the social-psychological issues facing women managers at work. Participants typically work with the following kinds of objectives:

- to clarify their attitudes and feelings about themselves in relation to their work roles and personal roles (eg colleague, boss, wife, mother, daughter)
- to review their experiences of managerial life: the specific issues they face as women
- to examine their management styles, in order to promote their personal strengths at work
- to study the concepts of power and politics and to enable themselves to apply these concepts effectively
- to help themselves to become more proactive in managing their careers
- to satisfy these goals in a safe environment in which they can test their own experiences against the experiences of other women.

Throughout the training, the emphasis is on helping women managers to help themselves become more effective.

Introducing participants to the concepts of role models, networking and mentoring is invaluable here. Perhaps most important of all is the support and friendship which participants are able to give to one another. This all takes place in a particular learning environment which differs considerably from that of a mainstream MBA programme. Table 1 summarises the key points of difference

**Table 1 Comparison of the learning environments of a traditional MBA programme and a women-only management course**

| <i>Focus</i>           | <i>Traditional MBA programme focus on activities</i>  | <i>Women's development programme focus on process</i>                                  |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Objective              | Giving students knowledge   | Helping participants with their issues   |
| Culture                | Fast, competitive, impersonal, guarded  | Slow, deep, open, intimate   |
| Media                  | Case studies, videos, techniques, models  | Own experience   |
| Teaching style         | Lecturing, based on assumption that lecturer has the knowledge and the 'right' answers          | Leading discussion based on assumption that the tutor has relevant experience to offer |
| Assessment of learning | Replication of 'knowledge' and ability to analyse managerial situations using particular models | Reflection and insightful self-analysis to evoke understanding of models               |
| Learning path          | From the general to the particular  | From the particular to the general   |

between traditional MBA teaching and women-only training.

### Reflecting through the assessment process

The authors recognise that, in many business schools, assessment of progress is important both for participants and for the schools. As Table 1 indicates, assessment of learning does not have to be the one-off replication of facts and use of managerial models. A more valuable kind of assignment is one which has an impact on the individual, shaping their sense of themselves through reflection. An important part of the MBA course elective for women at Cranfield School of Management, UK, is the undertaking of a small project in lieu of formal examination. Last year, students were asked to interview a senior woman of their choice about her life and career and, in writing up the project, to reflect on their own situation, taking into account what they had learnt during the course. The interviews provided a mirror for the MBA students. (See Vinnicombe and Singh (2002) for more on this study.) Paradoxically, the subjective

reflection on the other's career and life story enables women to review their own experience more objectively, and then bring to the surface an in-depth view of themselves in their personal context. Two examples are shown below.

'I admired her focus and success. She is also a fighter and really believes in herself. Despite the resistance she had to overcome, she kept hanging in there. It is fair to say that I am a fighter too, and have had my share of success. Where we differ is that I am too often doubting myself, and hopefully one day I will be as confident and focused as she is.'

'Real life experience shows me that I am more than capable of dealing with challenges, and tend to shine when under pressure, but my natural tendency is to stick within my comfort zone and utilise my existing skills and experiences as much as possible.'

The process is usually very affirming, thereby building self-esteem and confidence — qualities often lacking in women managers. This psychosocial methodology of eliciting life histories and reflecting on one's own situation has



been used to great effect as a developmental tool in women-only management training.

Before the course, women often felt they were alone in experiencing the masculine-gendered work culture, and the reflective women-only sessions and assignments allow them to make the link between their own experience and gender relations, so that they no longer see themselves as the cause of the experience. This is a critical learning point which the women-only training facilitates.

### **Understanding the importance of organisational politics**

A key issue arising in women's management programmes is women's interaction with organisational politics and personal influence (Mainiero, 1994). For many women managers, as in their definitions of career success, the focus at work is task accomplishment, challenge, high standards, expertise and attention to detail. They do not see the relevance of politics. They feel that if they are good at their jobs, others should notice and promote them. They should not have to make themselves visible, promote themselves or network with senior managers to build sponsorship (Singh *et al.*, 2002). Helping women managers to develop positive attitudes towards politics is one of the greatest challenges in these programmes. The advancement of women into senior levels of management in present-day organisations is contingent on women understanding how politics operate in their own organisations and being willing to engage in the process. Post-structuralist feminists such as Fletcher (1998) would challenge the gendered structures which have led to such a culture, because other more collective and relational models of the organisation could be achieved, valuing empathy, mutuality, reciprocity and sensitivity to emotional

contexts, allowing both men and women to flourish. The immediate concern, however, is with developing women in their present-day structures, and enabling them to advance.

### **Women and the impostor syndrome**

A consistent theme running through studies of women managers is the lack of confidence they show in themselves. They tend to rate themselves lower than male colleagues, and they have difficulty in accepting praise from others (Rudman, 1998). This lack of self-esteem among women can lead to the so-called 'impostor syndrome', where women fear they will be found out or unmasked as unworthy of the success they have attained or the positions they have won (Harvey and Katz, 1983). The MBA and associated traditional management development programmes often fail to affirm in women their fundamental belief in themselves.

### **Gender differences in working styles**

Research by Vinnicombe (1987) using the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), based on Jung's personality types, has yielded some significant and interesting findings about the differences between male and female working styles, particularly along the sensing/intuition dimension. Sensing people tend to prefer practical problems, systems and methods, are patient with routine details and search for standard problem-solving approaches. Intuitive people enjoy ambiguous problems, get bored with routine problems, frequently ignore the facts and search for creative approaches. Women managers tend to be much more intuitive. In this study, 70 per cent of male managers were sensing, whereas 40–60 per cent of the women were intuitive. Interestingly, no stereotypical

profile emerges for female managers. The implications for women in MBA classes is that, while most of the males have similar MBTI types, some women may find few colleagues with similar characteristics. Women managers are characteristically quite diverse in their working styles. This is a positive finding, since organisations require many different qualities to be effective. By developing women to senior levels, it is likely that diversity of thinking and working styles will contribute to better overall leadership.

### **Understanding career anchors**

Until recently, many girls were traditionally not socialised to make a strong investment of self in their future occupation or career. Hence, women who grew up within such an environment often have difficulty in identifying with and articulating a clear career strategy. This is a great block to career progress, as women managers often give the impression of not taking their careers seriously. In women-only programmes, women managers can help one another to see the themes in their careers, using a structured career exercise, such as career anchors (Schein, 1990). This is particularly relevant to women, because it defines the individual's self-image (abilities and talents, motives and drivers, and attitudes and values) through analysing all her varied work experiences. Not only does this exercise pull together an understanding of women's past jobs and motivations, but it also empowers women by showing them how they have influenced the shape of their career to date and how they may shape it in the future. The importance of balancing career and family is often central to women, and the career anchors exercise also facilitates an understanding of this dynamic.

### **Gendered stressors at work**

The nature of women's stressors (the reasons behind their stress and women's responses to stress) is often different from those of men. Traditionally, women have been socialised not to be aggressive or competitive, but to nurture. Braiker (1987) identified that success means something different for women and men, as Sturges's (1999) findings confirmed more recently. While men tend to define success in terms of quantifiable measures of achievement — money, status, material possessions — women tend to define success in terms of how well life is going in an emotional or interpersonal sense. While many men's success is primarily geared to achievement in the workplace, a woman's success is defined in terms of meeting a relentless stream of demands (often conflicting) from everyone around her at work and at home. Braiker labels this stress syndrome the 'Type E'. Type E women want to keep everyone's approval — that is part of how they know that they are succeeding, and they cope with the demands by trying to do it all, often at a substantial cost to their emotional and physical wellbeing.

Because women do not express anger or aggression as easily as men, they may not even recognise their feelings as being anger, which may be disguised as resentment, depression or moodiness. Since most women's experiences of stress do not coincide with most men's experiences of stress, it is valuable to provide women with their own forum in which to discuss what stresses them, the consequences of their stresses and how they handle stress. Women-only management training is such a forum.

### **Other forms of development for women managers**

In making this case for women-only training, the authors acknowledge that

such development should be within a framework of a variety of developmental initiatives for women managers and women with the potential and desire to become managers and leaders. Mentoring is an important career development mechanism for both men and women, and a recent study shows that both male and female protégés valued the psychosocial functions such as acceptance, friendship, coaching and counselling rather more than the career development functions of sponsorship and exposure provider (Singh *et al.*, 2002).

Within-organisation mentoring provides informed support and understanding regarding the individual in the particular organisational context, while coaching is undertaken by an outsider, focusing on the individual's perspective. Coaching is being increasingly used alongside mentoring, particularly for more senior managers (Waldroop and Butler, 1996). Coaching develops self-awareness and self-reflection, indicating the importance of these in the development of the individual. Another key development mechanism in organisations is on-the-job development (Ohlott *et al.*, 1994). While women may not experience as many developmental job opportunities at work as men do at similar levels, women reported experiencing greater developmental challenges from overcoming obstacles faced in their jobs. Significantly, women reported that they felt they had less support from others, fewer people to talk to, and were left out of important networks.

The authors would argue that women experiencing such barriers would really have benefited from an opportunity to reflect and share their experiences in a women-only development group. Thus these other developmental interventions sit well alongside the suggested women-only training as described in this section.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that the development process for women is not the same as the development process for men, and that therefore different developmental programmes from the traditional MBA are required for women to have an equal chance to succeed. Men's development is usually linked to increasing autonomy and separation from others as a means of strengthening identity and empowering themselves. It is only much later in men's development that men are ready to explore intimacy and accept others as equally important to themselves. Likewise, it is only much later in women's development that women can tolerate separation and finally see themselves as equal to others. The learning environment of the MBA is particularly suited to the male model, and that pedagogy has been privileged. Women's management programmes allow female managers to develop through a learning model that is more suited to female ways of knowing and learning, providing support during their undertaking of the traditional MBA course and during their organisational lives as participants in women-only training programmes.

The authors suggest that women-only development programmes should be designed around individual women managers' deepening understanding and strengthening of themselves in relation to other women managers and women tutors. This links back to the psychological theories of women's development discussed earlier in this paper which highlight the importance of attachments and relationships in determining how women see themselves, their careers, their lives and their continuing professional development. Eventually, it is hoped that the kind of development proposed would be available to both men and women, encompassed

within new forms of MBA courses which take heed of a diversity of needs and learning styles, reflecting an inclusive rather than exclusive approach. Indeed, the authors note that such a course is being designed by the Sloan School (*Financial Times*, 2002). Meanwhile, the authors propose that women-only management development courses can make a significant complementary contribution to traditional MBA courses and other executive development such as mentoring, coaching and on-the-job development. Surely at the beginning of this new millennium, it is time to acknowledge that women's management development is different from that of men. This needs to be reflected in the design of complementary management development programmes specifically for women, so that their progress in this new century can better reflect their talents and potential contribution to leadership.

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